DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 302 325 PS 017 682

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TITLE A Consideration of the Undesirable and Antisocial Effects of 'Victim' Toys.
PUB DATE Sep 87
NOTE 8p.; Paper submitted to the Committee of Inquiry into 'Victim' Toys, Federal Bureau of Consumer Affairs.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Antisocial Behavior; *Behavior Development; *Childhood Attitudes; *Children; Disabilities; Parent Child Relationship; Pretend Play; Role Models; *Toys; *Violence
IDENTIFIERS Victimization

ABSTRACT

This report surveys nine different toys with "victim" characteristics which are designed for children of 4-5 years and older. The toys were on display in toy shops, department stores, and supermarkets. The toys included doll-like figures with disfigurations, mutilations, mental and physical disabilities, heads which fly off, and eyes which can be pulled out of the head. Undesirable or antisocial psychological effects on children exposed to these toys include effects on: (1) parent, child, and child and adult relationships; (2) children's play behavior; (3) formation of attitudes towards the disabled. Children who are likely to be most vulnerable to the effects of victim toys include children: (1) of 2-5 years; (2) with limited exposure to prosocial influences; (3) who are exposed to violence and antisocial behaviors in the home environment; and (4) who deal with frustration and aggression by physical intimidation of other children. (RJC)

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ED302325

A CONSIDERATION OF THE UNDESIRABLE AND ANTISOCIAL EFFECTS OF 'VICTIM' TOYS

SUBMISSION TO:

THE COMMITTEE OF INQUIRY INTO 'VICTIM' TOYS
FEDERAL BUREAU OF CONSUMER AFFAIRS
ATTORNEY - GENERAL'S DEPARTMENT
BARTON, A.C.T.
AUSTRALIA.

SEPTEMBER, 1987

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(A) A PRELIMINARY SURVEY OF TOYS WITH 'VICTIM' CHARACTERISTICS

A preliminary survey of two local shopping centres (Westfield-Cheltenham & Chadstone) was conducted. The following toys were on display for sale in toy shops (Toyworld), department stores (Target) and a supermarket (Franklins):

(1) *Breath Blasters. Purchase price $9.99,*
Manufactured in Peoples' Republic of China (P.R.C.) for AXLON Corp., Sunnyvale, California, U.S.A. Consists of a series of small vinyl heads. The faces have painful or menacing expressions and when they are pressed, emit an unpleasant odour from a hole in the mouth

(2) *Garbage Pail Kids. Purchase price: 99c - $1.50,*
Available in sheets of 12 puffy stickers and plastic figurines. They are manufactured in Taiwan for Imperial Toy Corp., Los Angeles, California, U.S.A. Consists of doll - like figures depicting an extensive range of mutilation (disembodiment, evisceration, decapitation), physical disability (amputation, severe skin eruptions, hunch backed) mental disability (multiple personality, schizoid personality, crazed, caged doll) and violence (by way of guillotining, electrocution in the electric chair, machine gunned & being sucked down a plug hole).

(3) *Gross Out Grunkies. Purchase price: $9.99,*
Manufactured in P.R.C. for Remco Toys, New York, New York, U.S.A. Consists of vinyl figures of people with severe injuries. They come with a container of viscous material which can be put inside the figure and squeezed out the head to simulate viscera oozing from the head wounds.

(4) *Mad Balls. Purchase price: $6.95,*
manufactured in P.R.C. for Those Characters from Cleveland, Amtoy Inc., Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.A. Consists of plastic figures with ball heads with human facial features. Their heads fly off when a mechanism is triggered on their body.

(5) *Rude Ralph. Purchase price: $5.99,*
Manufactured in P.R.C. for AXLON (cited above). Consists of vinyl heads of which eyes can be pulled out to produce 4 different rude noises.

(6) *Skateboard Smack - Ups. Purchase price: $6.99,*
Manufactured in P.C.R. for Ned Strogin Creative Services, Playtime Productions Inc, New York, New York, U.S.A. Consists of series of plastic figurines depicting children riding skateboards and having a range of gross bodily injuries and disfigurements - presumably acquired from accidents while riding skateboards (skulls split open, flattened body & facial disfigurements).

(7) *Trash Head Spitballs. Purchase price: $2.99,*
Manufactured in P.R.C. for Lanard Toys, New York, New York, U.S.A. Consists of a series of vinyl heads depicting a range of mutilations (eye and accompanying viscera protruding from eye socket, large bleeding cuts to the face, split skull with brain tissue protruding from 'wound') and unhygienic acts (picking green dripping mucous from nostrils). As well, heads can be filled with liquid and can be made to simulate spitting from a hole in their mouths.

(8) *UG - G - G - G - GLY . Horri - Balls. Purchase price: $1.69,*
Manufactured in P.R.C. Consists of a series of small vinyl balls depicting a range of 'horror' heads with remote resemblance to boa constrictors, boars, mummies (embalmed variety!), cyclops and tortoises. The only 'human' figure being Negroi - Ball - a distinctly racist allusion.

(9) *Weird Balls G. R. U. N. T. Purchase price: $7.99,*
GRUNT is anachronic for gruesome, repulsive, ugly, nasty & terrible. Manufactured in P.R.C. for Crayart International, New York, New York. Consists of vinyl figures with human bodies and monster - like or disfigured heads. All come with a weapon (e.g cleaver, machine gun), included separately in the package

(B) POSSIBLE UNDESIRABLE OR ANTISOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS ON CHILDREN EXPOSED TO 'VICTIM' TOYS

I am unaware of any formal psychological research which shows a relationship between children playing with any of the 9 toys cited above and displaying any subsequent undesirable or antisocial behaviour. However, my arguments do draw on fourteen years experience as a clinician, lecturer and researcher in the fields of educational and developmental psychology.

All the abovementioned toys come with a recommended age of 4 or 5 years and over. Since, by adolescence, children have outgrown playing with toys, it is reasonable to assume that these 'victim' toys are intended to be bought for and by the 5 to 12 years age group (i.e. middle childhood). In my opinion there are many characteristics of these toys which at best, are developmentally inappropriate and at worst, potentially harmful to the psychological adjustment of the children of this impressionable age group. Arguments supporting this opinion are given below.

(1) *Effects on Parent / Child and Adult / Child Relationships*

These toys are promoted and sold by adults and often bought by parents for their children. Therefore, children who buy or receive these toys from adults may assume that many of the antisocial acts depicted in the toys or able to be inflicted on the toys are approved of by adults. However, children were to show any of the behaviours depicted in these toys e.g. spitting or making fun of disabled people, then they would more than likely receive some form of reprimand from an adult. In this way, the children are receiving conflicting messages. On the one hand it is acceptable to play with toys which imitate antisocial behaviour or can be mutilated or made fun of, but on the other hand it is not acceptable to imitate these behaviours in real life.

Parents and adults are powerful role models for children in middle childhood; they look to adults to learn appropriate ways of behaving in relation to other people. They identify with the attitudes and values of their parents. For the younger children in this age group (5 - 8 years), information needs to be presented clearly and consistently for learning to take place. If the information is ambiguous, then they may become confused about what is the appropriate way to behave, which may in turn create tension and anxiety within the children. Since older children, (10 - 12 years), are more able to recognise the double standard underlying the conflicting messages, the effect is likely to be a loss of esteem for adults as appropriate role models and, over time, lead to an undermining of adult authority.

(2) *Effects on Play Behaviour*

In play children adapt toys and objects from their environment to imitate and practice social skills and appropriate role behaviours. In this way, play serves as a medium for self expression which helps children to master many complex social issues in their own idiosyncratic way (Tizard, 1977). Most of the functions of the abovementioned toys are limited; many are static figurines (Garbage Pail kids, Skateboard Smack - Ups, Horri - Balls) or have a single antisocial action (Breath Blasters, Trash Head Spitballs) or the child can do one action only with them (Gross Out Grunkies, Mad Balls, Rude Ralph, Weird Balls). As well, they depict explicitly violent acts of mutilation and murder (Rude Ralph, Weird Balls, Garbage Pail Kids), gross injuries and disabilities (Skateboard Smack Ups, Gross Out Grunkies, Trash Head Spitballs). It is difficult to imagine how these toys could be adapted by the child for any developmentally useful purpose as is often the case with conventional toys. Conventional doll and domestic toys usually encourage social play and conversation in children and evoke direct imitation of observed adult nurturing behaviour (Jenvey, 1982)

Research shows that toys that are highly structured and which have explicit functions (e.g most of the 'victim' toys) are likely to produce play whose content is restricted to the particular themes and actions suggested by the toys. (McLoyd, 1983; Olszewski & Fuson, 1982; & Pulaski, 1973). Therefore, it could be argued that themes portrayed in the 'victim' toys have few identifiable characteristics from most children's everyday life and are ineffective in providing children with opportunities for social interaction or practising prosocial behaviours. In fact, because of their highly structured nature and restricted functions, the play content of the children who play them will be restricted to the antisocial, unhygienic and violent themes and actions suggested by these toys

(3) *Effects on the Formation of Attitudes Towards the Disabled*

The injuries, mutilations and disabilities portrayed in these toys far exceed the incidence of these injuries, disfigurements and disabilities in real life. The chances of children in the 5 -12 years age range actually seeing someone with their brains oozing out of their head (Gross Out Grunkies, Garbage Pail Kids) or their skull split open (Skateboard Smack Ups, Trash Head Spitballs) are very rare. There are many dismembered, mutilated and decapitated figures (Garbage Pail Kids, Trash Head Spitballs, Weird Balls) - all portrayed as objects of fun and amusement. Disability is also a recurrent theme: hunchbacks, schizoid and deranged , caged doll - like figures are depicted in a satirical way in the Garbage Pail stickers and figurines.

At present, there is much effort to integrate the physically, intellectually and mentally disabled into the school and general community. For these efforts to be successful, awareness of and sensitivity to the special needs of the disabled must be developed in the wider community. These toys, which portray many categories of disabled people as hapless 'victims' therefore undermine positive attempts at integration. Frequent or prolonged exposure of children to certain stimuli has the effect of desensitising them to the particular stimuli. They habituate to the stimuli and respond less and less to it, e.g. children's desensitising to violence due to overexposure to violent television programmes is reported in Radecki (1983). It could be argued that children who constantly play with 'victim' toys may become so accustomed to the recurrent injury, disfigurement and disability depicted in them that they become less and less aware and sensitive to the special needs of the disabled and injured in real life.

(4) *Inappropriateness of themes depicted in Toys for 5 - 12 year old Children.*

Most of the themes and objects depicted in these toys are done in a highly satirical way. There is also a heavy emphasis on sarcasm and irony. For example, a Garbage Pail kid, a caricature of Ronald Reagan, with a wizened face, a nappy and holding a machine gun is entitled 'Ray - gun'. Children of this age group will neither grasp the pun on his name nor the political satirisation. Most children in this age group have fairly literal senses of humour, it is not until they reach adolescence when their thinking becomes more abstract and less concrete are they able to appreciate the subtleties of such forms of humour as satire, irony and sarcasm (Yasilove, 1978). Also, many figures in the Garbage Pail series portray serious social problems, many of which children of this age group, do not yet have any awareness. If they do, then they probably would be unaware the complex moral issues underlying them (e.g capital punishment by electrocution, nuclear explosion).

(C)**PARTICULAR CHILDREN WHO ARE LIKELY TO BE MORE VULNERABLE TO THE UNDESIRABLE EFFECTS OF 'VICTIM' TOYS**

(1) Very young children (2-5) year olds. As a result of their limited cognitive capacities, preschool children have difficulty in distinguishing reality from fantasy. Therefore, all the simulated violence, injury and disability displayed by these toys could actually frighten small children.

(2) Children who have limited exposure prosocial influences. For example children whose play is largely unsupervised and who have few opportunities to discuss social issues and problems with their teachers, parents or other members of their families.

(3) Children who are exposed to violence and antisocial behaviours in the home environment. 'Victim' toys may serve to provide means by which they can model antisocial behaviour which they observe frequently in their own home.

(4) Children, who tend to take out their own frustration and aggression by the the physical intimidation of other children (bullying) . Playing with 'Victim' toys may provide reinforcement for their victimising behaviour - thereby ensuring the continuation of the behaviour.

(D) **RECOMMENDATION**

In my opinion, notwithstanding the apparent absence of specific formal studies, the effects of 'victim toys' may promote undesirable and antisocial behaviour and attitudes in children. The attitudes and behaviours thereby promoted may in turn affect the positive psychological development of children. Therefore these toys should not be encouraged.

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